Many minds molded by Martha Ford

One September day in 1912, a 24-year-old young woman named Martha Kloninger left her home on Washougal River Road, walked into Washougal High School and taught her first class in German.

Apart from a few minor changes (like the fact that she is now called Martha Ford, and is 88 years old), this is very much the same lively and lovely person she must have been in 1912. There is a humorous smile, in a serenely beautiful face, dancing eyes so keen they miss nothing.

The lady's sense of command must also have been readily recognized by the many hundreds of Washougal men and women who, as seventh graders, passed through her firm hands.

"I'm a disciplinarian," said Martha Ford, "as most people around here can tell you!"

While Martha Ford began teaching German in high school, it was in grade school that she spent her career. The story is an interesting one, and a sad one in ways.

Her parents were Germans who came directly to settle in Washougal in 1887. She was born in 1888 ("with the neighbors helping deliver me — not with a doctor's help"), and spoke German before she could speak English. After high school she went to live in Germany with relatives in order to get a diploma as a high school teacher in German.

In 1912, she returned to the United States and became what must have been a highly qualified German teacher at Washougal High School. It must have looked like a promising career.

But then came World War I, and it changed her career.

This was in 1914, long before the U.S. entered the war.

"Germany was suddenly the enemy," Martha said. "Everything German was taboo. It was annihilated. They wouldn't even play music by German composers like Beethoven and Mendelsohn. Everybody thought the Germans were bad people . . . ."

And of course German was immediately dropped from every school curriculum, and there was no further use for Martha Kloninger.

It must have been a traumatic time for a sensitive girl in such a position. It was hard for anyone to be German when everybody hated Germans. She did suffer, and she remembers her mother suffering. But, in fact, she understands that hatred now, and is in no way bitter.

Her only comment was, "War is war. People always get hurt."

Martha decided that her German teaching days were done, and so they were. She decided to go into grade school teaching, went to the University of Washington, and then to Bellingham. Having qualified all over again, she began teaching in little country schools.

Finally, she was back teaching in Washougal, but this time it was as a seventh grade teacher in the then Washougal Grade School.

There she taught for many years, and is loved and respected by so many local people into whom, down the years, she hammered her brand of unique Teutonic discipline and Martha Ford sensitivity.

But her rapport with young people continues. She recently spoke to a group of Washougal High School students about how it was when she first began her schooling at the old Sunnyside District School (now a private residence). Her audience was as attentive as her early students must have been.

"The first day of school I can remember very distinctly. We had to, of course, take our lunch which we took in a lard bucket or lunch bucket and we set them up in the little ante room and went into the one room school.

"There was to that building just this one room classroom and the little ante room. In that ante room there was a water bucket and a dipper in it which was our water supply.

"And then I can remember very distinctly there was a big drum stove in the middle near the rear seats on each side. Boys sat on the left and girls on the right.

"As for the school seats, they were very much similar to the school seats they had for a quarter of a century. Of course, the seat and the desk were one. That is, the desk behind was attached to the seat ahead. The desk had a mechanism that would let it move, so when there were gatherings in the building there was plenty of knee space for older people to sit.

"I can remember that very distinctly my first day I had brought an apple. Of course, I was used to eating apples anytime I wanted to. I had no idea it was against the rules. This Jossi, this girl my parents had with me, was trying to get me to stop eating it and without the teacher seeing it.

"Of course, I didn't understand and finally the teacher saw me and put me outside on the patio, so I was very much disgraced the first day of school."

There were eight grades in a single class at this school, with "a big aisle up the center of the room, windows on both east and west sides, Mrs. Ford recalled.

"The one box-shaped bench in the front was the recitation bench. We had to sit there when we came up there to recite, and there was a little platform six inches high.

"On that was the teacher's desk and behind that was the blackboard. The teacher would sit at her desk and have us recite to her at her desk at the recitation bench."

Mrs. Ford said it must have been difficult for that young, inexperienced teacher to handle the job.

"Many of the children were much older and many were in school for a long time. They quit school and that would be the end. When they weren't busy at home they could be in school. Some were quite old."

But by her third year, the young Martha's parents decided the long walk to school in the winter would have to cease.

"We lived right at the edge of the school district. We decided to join the Washougal School District instead. We had some land just up past the little Washougal River, so my parents thought that maybe it would be possible for me to go to the Washougal school.

"But our residence was in the Sunnyside district so that is where I was supposed to go. But Washougal took me with a payment of tuition."

That school was located where Columbia School is now. Mrs. Ford described it as a two-story, primary with a stairway right up the center.

MARTHA FORD
. . . longtime Washougal teacher

But Martha Ford hasn't spent her entire life in schools. Another side of the teacher is that of world traveler. She was and still is a dedicated wanderer.

She has been across the Atlantic 12 times. She has been to the Holy Land, in Australia, Greece, Italy, Germany, Belgium and about 11 other European countries. She brought her mother to Germany in 1936, there buying a new BMW (her eyes still gleam as she describes that much-loved car with its five gears on the floor), toured 6,000 miles around Europe, and then settled for two years in Germany with her mother.

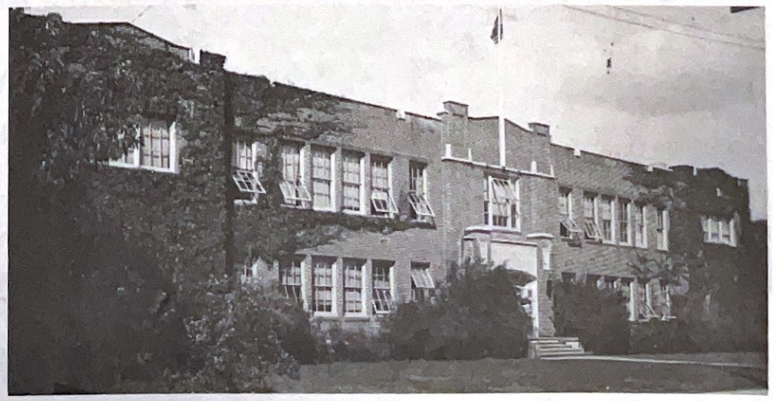
That, of course, was the year of the Berlin Olympics, and the Nazis were making their great bid to impress the rest of Europe,

Martha remembers how "they tried so hard to tell us how wonderful Adolf Hitler was, but we had learned in America about both sides of Hitler."

She now remembers with amusement that when she tried doing some English teaching there, the Germans did not find her acceptable, because her accent was American and not British.

In all her teaching and voyaging, Martha still found time for married life, but only five years of it. She married Sim Ford from Missouri in 1923, and he died in 1928.

"I have neither chick nor child," she said, "nor brothers or sisters. In fact, I am all alone in the world. But I have some truly wonderful friends."



NOW THE COLUMBIA SCHOOL in Washougal, this brick structure started life as the high school building, at Second and Ash streets.